

Interview - J. Ann Tickner

Written by E-International Relations

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J. Ann Tickner is Distinguished Scholar in Residence at the American University. She is also a Professor Emerita at the University of Southern California where she taught for fifteen years before moving to American University. Her principle areas of teaching and research include international theory, peace and security, and feminist approaches to international relations. She served as President of the International Studies Association from 2006-2007. Her books include, *A Feminist Voyage Through International Relations*, *Gendering World Politics: Issues and Approaches in the Post-Cold War Era*, and *Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving International Security*.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in your field?

I think the most exciting research is being done at the margins by scholars who are pushing the disciplinary boundaries of what we think of as IR into areas such as historical sociology, post-colonialism, race and gender. Although the mainstream US discipline is still quite hegemonic, I believe this hegemony is somewhat on the decline and there is more space for critical perspectives.

There are good revisionist histories that tell non-conventional stories about the origins of the discipline. And there is a great deal of exciting critical work being done by scholars in other parts of the world that attempts to construct an IR that reaches beyond geographical and disciplinary boundaries. The *Worlding Beyond the West* series edited by Ole Wæver and Arlene Tickner and by Tickner and David Blaney is a good example. Other examples are recent work on race, empire and gender. It is quite astonishing how IR has erased imperialism and the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century from its historical memory. These are issues that are fueling so many of today's conflicts.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Going to graduate school in the mid-1970s to pursue a Ph.D. I knew I wanted to pursue a somewhat unconventional topic – North-South relations and issues of global justice. But I did not notice how many of the authors I was reading, and subsequently used for teaching, were white males, almost all from the US. In the mid 1980s, I happened to read Evelyn Fox Keller's *Gender and Science*. Keller is a physicist who claimed that the questions the natural sciences ask and how they answer them demonstrates a masculine bias. I thought her claims could equally well apply to IR. And when I first discovered some of the early feminist IR authors, such as Cynthia Enloe, it completely changed how I thought about the world. Enloe's advice to always question "common sense" has stayed with me.

As I continue to be challenged and inspired by feminist scholars, I have also been engaging with indigenous knowledge, a body of literature I first came across during a visit to New Zealand. More recently I have read Robert Vitalis' fascinating book, *White World Order: Black Power Politics* which tells a revisionist history of IR's founding, a discipline whose original mission was to deal with the problem of "inferior" races and the possibility of race war. These readings and many others, both inside and outside what we define as IR, have given me a whole new perspective on the world. Learning how to see the world from the margins effects some remarkable shifts in one's thinking.

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You are a child of World War II. To what extent has your childhood influenced and impacted upon your career in international relations?

My early childhood on the outskirts of London was marked by nightly bombings, air raids, shelters, food shortages, and blackouts. I don't remember being terribly frightened at the time. I had never known any other way of living. But it took me a long time before I could read about the war or watch war movies. After the war we moved to New York where my father worked for the United Nations; those early days were a time of optimism for those at the UN and there were great expectations about what the UN could achieve in rebuilding a just postwar world. I am sure all of these early experiences contributed to my career choice, particularly my early focus on peace studies. My Ph.D. dissertation was inspired by the work of peace researcher Johan Galtung, one chapter of which engaged the writings of Mahatma Gandhi.

As a feminist scholar, where do you see the field of international relations being overly-masculine in its discourse?

What we consider the "canon" in IR has been largely populated by white western males although this is changing somewhat with more women now entering the field. As I mentioned earlier, there are now revisionist histories that are bringing non-white authors to our attention but most of these have also been male. And as philosopher of science Sandra Harding reminds us (and Keller also), men ask questions about issues that are of importance to them and they answer them in certain preferred ways. And of course, the subject matter that is privileged in IR – national security and war — is very masculine. Security studies is a field in which there are still few women and one in which women feel particularly marginalized. Terms like "high" and "low" politics and "realism" versus "idealism" are highly gendered. Looking at discourse through gendered lenses helps us see the world differently.

How do you see the relationship between gender concerns and the distribution of power?

Although it is not commonly seen that way, gender itself is a power relation signifying unequal power between women and men. Gender is not just about women; it is about hierarchical socially constructed relations of inequality that exist to varying degrees in all societies. Another way to think about gender and power is by asking who has the power to speak for the discipline we call IR and who is disciplined out of these conversations. Authorized knowledge, particularly knowledge upon which we bestow the label "scientific" has tremendous power. It is the winners and those who have the most power that get to tell the stories that shape our understanding of the world. These stories have generally not included the voices of women, minorities and the disempowered.

You are particularly regarded for your 1997 article "*You Just Don't Understand*". What are some of the focal arguments within the article, and what are some refutations to the critiques of your article?

The 1997 article was the first in a series of articles I wrote between 1997 and 2011 in which I attempted to bring feminism into conversation with the IR mainstream and suggest some possibilities for dialogue. The 1997 article focused on some of the misunderstandings about how feminists define gender (about both women and men and relations between them) and what they mean by theory. The IR mainstream often asks the question as to whether feminists are doing theory at all, a question motivated by the widely held assumption about theory being equated with positivist, rationalist theory. Over time, I have become more and more convinced that the miscommunication to which I alluded in that article continues, and that it is primarily methodological. Feminists work with different ontologies and epistemologies. Most IR feminists draw on postpositivist theoretical traditions, traditions to which positivists are unwilling to grant the status of theory. Until we are all willing to judge the merit of theories on their own terms, rather than as theories that don't measure up to positivist standards, misunderstandings will continue.

Do you believe that sufficient progress has been made to gender-equalize the discipline over the last few decades, and where do you see the field of feminism in international relations evolving in the decades to come?

In terms of whether the field is more open to women, certainly that is the case compared to twenty-five years ago

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when I remember how hard I had to look to find women at professional meetings. But there are still barriers – too few women at the top of the profession and a disproportionate number in non-tenure track positions. And there is a huge lack of minority women (and men). In terms of granting equal status to feminist work, the answer would have to be no although there is variation cross-nationally.

In the US, the methodological issues that I mentioned earlier are a stumbling block to wider recognition. But I do think that feminist IR has made great strides in being recognized as a legitimate approach particularly outside the United States. *The International Journal of Feminist Politics* has gained widespread international recognition and publishers are eager for feminist work. And feminist scholarship has spread into so many exciting different areas pushing beyond the boundaries of what are normally considered the IR discipline. I expect feminist IR to remain vibrant as it takes on new issues and new theories, such as postcolonialism, race and queer theory, issues that have never been part of IR or have been forgotten. Hopefully it will help us expand what we mean by international relations.

Beyond gender concerns and feminism, which other areas within international relations theory today would say appear either too heavily-focused or neglected?

The discipline has been very focused on the great powers in the system and with their security concerns. It looks at the world from the top down, often employing a structuralist ontology. We need more work that examines IR from the margins and looks at the lives of ordinary people who are impacted, often negatively, by the workings of global politics and the world economy. As I said earlier race and empire have been forgotten or ignored. And we need an IR that is more historically grounded and a history that is not written by the winners

What is the most important advice you want to give to young scholars of International Relations and outside the field of international relations, what would your advice be to feminists and women's rights activists?

If you choose a scholar's career path inside the academy, I would say to pursue your passion not what others want you to do. However, you need to be mindful of the constraints that the academy imposes on what it considers to be "worthwhile" studying. In places such as Australia/New Zealand and the UK, the constraints are less than in the US. For future feminists the advice would be similar. Don't be talked out of pursuing your passion because it is not considered "IR". The policy world is looking for gender specialists; the academy, at least in the US, is not training enough of them. To activists, as well as to young scholars, particularly those who work with women and gender, thank you for all the inspiring work you do. I believe that we scholars must make our work intelligible and useful to those who do the hard work out in the policy and activist worlds.